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ABSTRACT

Presented by the Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, this speech addressed the following: (1) We were all created different! Equal yet different. Different but equal; (2) Those seemingly paradoxical statements do not have to present a dilemma of choice; (3) Our nation has always been one of great diversity; (4) A pluralist society is by its very nature a contradictory society; and (5) A civic dialogue must begin in order to address these issues that threaten to divide us. (EH)

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REMARKS TO THE COUNCIL FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF CITIZENSHIP
JENNINGS RANDOLPH CONGRESSIONAL FORUM
RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC
MAY 20, 1994

Juan E. Mestas
Deputy Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities

I was invited here today to speak about the "national conversation on the nature of American pluralism" that the National Endowment for the Humanities has proposed. This theme seems to fit quite well with the aims of your group, a consortium established to "preserve and enhance the public's understanding of our Constitutional and political traditions and to promote civic participation."

In preparing my remarks for today, I decided to go back to a speech I made in Idaho exactly one year ago, on May 20, 1993, to a conference of college administrators. At the time, I was a professor and administrator at Portland State University. The topic was very similar to the one we approach today, so I re-read my old speech to see if my perspective on pluralism had been altered when I assumed this new persona as a faceless Washington bureaucrat.

I began that speech as follows:

> **We were all created equal.** That is a good place to start. Let me begin, then, by affirming the equal dignity of all manifestations of humanity. And this is not a trivial affirmation. It is both a statement of principle and a collective survival skill; because, in a society increasingly aware of its diversity and increasingly assertive of its differences, we need to remind ourselves constantly of the fundamental values that hold us together **as a people.** Just letting things be won't do. Inertia alone will tear us apart.

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I ended that speech by recalling that initial affirmation, that we were all created equal, and affirming just the opposite: **"We were all created different! Equal yet different. Different but equal. And that is good!"**

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What I said in between is not particularly relevant to today's discussion, but I still think those two affirmations, paradoxic as they may seem, provide an adequate frame for an exploration of the challenges of pluralism.

We tend to treat every paradox as a dilemma; that is, as a set of mutually exclusive options connected--or disconnected--by an "or." Thus seen, the selection of one option requires the rejection of the other. Yet, when we do that, we distort our perception of social reality, which is often contradictory. The debate about pluralism in our country is often distorted by this imposition of choice. Are we one, or are we many? Are we one people, or an aggregation of dissimilar groups that share a common space? Are we a nation of many cultures, or is there a distinct, clearly identifiable "American culture"? If we choose this last option, by the way, a new challenge arises: How do we describe the "American culture"? What are the elements that make it distinct and clearly identifiable?

These questions were bypassed recently by a school board in Florida when it decided that county students should be taught that American culture is "superior to other foreign or historic cultures." I become uncomfortable when the words "superior" and "culture" are juxtaposed. Too many wars have been fought and too many people have been oppressed based on some notion of cultural superiority. But I am sure the intention in this case was wholesome: let's infuse in our children a sense of civic pride, of cultural pride, of national pride. And I cannot argue with that **intention**. Yet, as an educator, I know well that what we mean to teach is not always what the students learn. We may mean to teach pride and inadvertently plant the seeds of arrogance. And one of the children being taught in that civic-minded county may find himself some day in a foreign land with a weapon in his hand and a feeling of cultural superiority toward the people in front of him. That could be dangerous. We should be careful what we tell the children. They learn more than we teach.

I called your attention to that decision by a school board in Florida because it illustrates a fear and a need that many feel in our nation: a fear of cultural disintegration, a need to protect our cultural self. In some cases, that fear and that need take the form of nostalgia for a past that never was. We have always been a nation of great diversity.

In the second of the Federalist Papers, John Jay placed his hope for a strong nation on a perceived cultural sameness: "Providence," he said, "has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people--a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs..." But, as Professor Martin Marty of the University of Chicago has pointed out, "Jay did not

notice the story of the different 'ancestors' of the Native Americans, the German 'language' of the Pennsylvanians, the Catholic and Jewish 'religion' of difference among Marylanders and New Yorkers, what women might have said over 'principles of government,' and 'the manners and customs' of African slaves."

We have always been a nation of great diversity. What has become more evident in recent years is the affirmation of the value of cultural uniqueness assertively expressed by ethnic groups. What has become more evident as well is the fear that such affirmation of cultural uniqueness threatens the integrity of the "American culture." The "Black is beautiful" slogan of the sixties brought to many the awareness that "Black," indeed, is beautiful. Some found that awareness threatening. Some find the present proliferation of hyphenated identities threatening. Why talk of "African-Americans," "Hispanic-Americans," "Asian-Americans," and so forth, some ask. Isn't just plain "Americans" good enough? The question implies, again, a dilemma begging for a choice: this **or** that. Why not this **and** that?

As someone who became an American by choice, not by birth, I face these questions often. Sometimes I pose them to myself. I was born in Cuba of Spanish parents and spent my childhood in Cuba and Spain. I went to high school in Tennessee. I did my undergraduate work in Puerto Rico and my graduate work in New York. I have spent my adult life in Puerto Rico, New York, Northern California, Southern California, Philadelphia, Portland (Oregon), and Washington, D.C. **I am an American.**

In some ways, I am a typical American. In others, I am not. There are many identities within my American identity. Fortunately, for my mental health, they get along with one another most of the time. But not always. My cultural identity has been shaped not only by my own experiences, but by the experiences of my ancestors, and the ancestors of my country, and my friends and my enemies, and strangers who have left their impressions in my life and in the life of the world in which I live my life. My cultural identity has been shaped not only by reality and my reflection on reality, but by our collective myths. I find myself answering multiple choice questions about my identity by choosing "all of the above at one time or another and, more often than not, all at the same time." The identities within myself sometimes contradict each other, just like the identities within our country sometimes contradict each other. A pluralistic society is by its very nature a contradictory society. Is that bad? As Walt Whitman reminded us, we contradict ourselves because we have multitudes inside.

I can assert proudly that I am an American. And others very different from me make the same assertion just as proudly. What makes us alike while remaining different? What goes into the glue that binds us together?

Sometimes we hear strident, dissonant voices that preach hatred and try to pitch some among us against others among us. But those voices have not prevailed. We are still one people. And while we despise the message of those voices, the very fact that they are heard affirms a central, unifying value of our nation. When a controversial speaker preaches hate at a college campus, we feel uncomfortable. But we also feel proud of our respect for freedom of speech, of our tradition of tolerance.

And sometimes we misinterpret dissonance. We hear the protesting voices of those who feel disenfranchised, disempowered, and we think they threaten to divide the republic. The civil rights movement and the suffrage movement, for instance, confronted some Americans with other Americans. (It also confronted some Americans with themselves.) Some thought they were divisive movements. Yet, their lasting legacy was an affirmation of the best values of our country. Their lasting message was a challenge to all Americans to live up to the ideals that we profess. If this country is about freedom, then there should be freedom for **all of us**. If this country is about democracy, then no one should be disenfranchised. They were unifying, not divisive movements. They reminded us that America is a banquet, and we all deserve a place at the table.

But the tension between cultural diversity and cultural unity remains. It manifests itself in an uneasy balance, the balance that comes from two roughly equal forces pushing in opposite directions. In a sense, our pluralism could be a centrifugal force. Left unchecked, it could pull us apart. Other countries, much less diverse than ours, have been pulled apart. But that force does not remain unchecked. There is a centripetal force that pulls us together, that makes up our sense of one people in one nation. What are the elements of that force? What keeps us together as one people in one nation?

Those are the central questions that prompted the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Sheldon Hackney, to propose a "national conversation on the nature of American pluralism." In a recent speech at Vanderbilt University, Dr. Hackney identified the challenge of our time "to revitalize our civic life in order to realize a new birth of freedom. All of our people," he said, "--left, right, and center--have a responsibility to examine and discuss what unites us as a country, what we share as common American values in a nation comprised of so many divergent groups and beliefs. For too long, we have let what divides us capture the headlines and sound bites, polarizing us rather than bringing us together." He envisioned "a national conversation open to all Americans, a conversation in which all voices need to be heard and in which we must struggle seriously to define the meaning of American pluralism."

Some elements of this national conversation will be sponsored or supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. But we hope that other groups and organizations--such as yours--will engage in this dialogue. To initiate the discussion, we offer some questions:

- What is our image of the America of the twenty-first century?
- Is America to become a collection of groups, whose members think of themselves first as members of a certain ethnic community, race, or culture and only second as Americans?
- Can our ideal be an America of shared values and commitments that nonetheless retains cultural differences? And can we identify those values and commitments that we need to share if we are to be a successful society?
- What picture of an ideal America will inform our struggles with current problems? And--of particular importance to the NEH--what role can the humanities play in drawing that picture?

We do not expect the national conversation to result in a single, immutable answer to these questions, of course. No check list can provide an answer to the question of what is an American. But we hope that this dialogue will allow us to examine questions such as these thoughtfully and civilly, giving at least as much attention to what brings us together as we much too often do to what pulls us apart. We hope this dialogue will be conducted with tolerance and respect, understanding that, just as difference does not imply conflict, civility of discourse does not require agreement. And we hope that this conversation will contribute to a greater awareness and appreciation of our people--all our people--and our nation--one nation.

In a statement issued to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I have a dream" speech, President and Mrs. Clinton and Vice President and Mrs. Gore approached some of these questions with prose of eloquent beauty:

> We Americans are proud of who we are. We take pride in our own regional, ethnic, religious and family identities, for these give us a sense of self. But we are all Americans first. Being American means bridging differences, not stamping them out. It means learning from each other. It means including everyone as "us," rather than excluding some as "them." It means we can sing our own song,

enjoy the singing of others, sing together, and even make up new songs.

Let me leave those words with you. Thank you.